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ABSTRACT

Rhetorical studies of the media during the past decade have tended to focus upon specific types of media such as music, television, film, and radio. Most recently, however, rhetorical studies such as James Chesebro's "The Media Reality" suggest that rhetorical critics are moving toward an examination of the collective influence of the media in shaping cultural realities. The undergraduate students at the University of South Florida are introduced to the relationships between rhetorical criticism and the media through a 16-week junior level course called Popular Forms of Public Communication. The course is divided into five units. The first unit introduces students to rhetorical criticism and focuses their attention on selected speeches and pieces of discourse. The second unit of the course deals with television and radio as forms of public communication. The third unit focuses on film as communication, while the fourth focuses on music as a form of communication. The final unit examines the graphic media such as cartoons, posters, magazines, photography, and postcards as popular media. During the course students are required to write three different rhetorical analyses focusing on three different media. The course constitutes a challenge to the students because it requires them to develop a critical perspective for rhetorical criticism in general and the media in particular. (HOD)

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RHETORIC, PUBLIC ADDRESS, AND MEDIA STUDIES

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RHETORIC, PUBLIC ADDRESS, AND MEDIA STUDIES

Sam Becker, one of the lecturers in the 1982 Jensen Lecture Series, drew upon a passage from John Barth's The Floating Opera to explore the relationships between public discourse, the media, and interpersonal communication.[1] The excerpt seems appropriate here as well, as we begin to explore the relationships between rhetorical studies and the media. Barth is explaining why he called his novel The Floating Opera:

> It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along both banks. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past, and then they'd have to wait until the tide ran back again to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps they'd have to use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbors, or hear the word passed along from upriver to downriver. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. I needn't explain that that's how much of life works; our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely; they float back again, and we either renew our friendship--catch up to date--or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more.[2]

As Becker built upon Barth's statement to discuss the complexities of communication, and the interaction between the media and interpersonal communication, so too might the rhetorical critic build upon it as a basis for exploring the forms of public discourse influential in the formation and transformation of ideologies and human values. In part, The Floating Opera responds to Chesebro's question: "How do . . . [we] acquire the values . . . [we] employ?"[3]

Though Chesebro is certainly not the first to raise the question of values, the question itself drives at the core of communication studies in general and rhetorical criticism in particular, because the goal of criticism is to illumine value bases of human action and to render judgments (valuation, if you please) about the discourse itself. To focus on Chesebro's particular question is also important because of Chesebro himself as a rhetorical critic dealing with television. He represents and is part of a direction rhetorical criticism seems to be taking as we continue (as we have done for the past several decades) to understand the relationships between the media and the public arena of issues and ideas as they bear upon the formation and transformation of ideologies and human values.

It is not the intent of this paper to set forth a particular theoretical perspective for rhetorical criticism, nor to offer a rhetorical analysis of a particular piece of the "floating opera", but rather to explore briefly those illustrative pieces of criticism that appear representative of the critics' growing curiosity with questions that compel them to extend their critical visions beyond speakers and speeches to include all or many of the forms communication assumes in the public arena. The secondary purpose of this discussion is to focus on the pedagogical concerns associated with introducing undergraduate students to the relationships between rhetorical criticism and the media. I will divide the first portion of the discussion concerning the expanding scope of the critic's object of study along the lines of music,

television, film, and radio. Certainly those are not all inclusive of the critics' focus on the popular forms of public communication; however, they are representative of a significant segment of all available media. Media such as telephones, computers, and other print forms are not dealt with in this discussion. The second portion of the paper will set forth briefly the approach to and structure of a particular course dealing with rhetorical criticism, and will characterize the types of criticism students embark upon.

Part I: Rhetorical Studies

Rhetorical Studies: Music

McGuire correctly asserts that the "investigation of the rhetorical dimensions of music and song is still in its infancy", and that the bulk of those studies concern protest songs.[4] Elsewhere, I have dealt with the persuasive dimensions of songs produced by the Industrial Workers of the World,[5] and selected songs of organized labor.[6] Other critics such as Kosokoff and Carmichael focus on the persuasive power of songs delivered in conjunction with speeches dealing with social issues.[7] Other studies such as those by Gonzalez and Makay[8] and by Thomas[9] examine protest songs or particular singers like Dylan and Baez. Mohrmann and Scott[10] and Rogers[11] are illustrative of critics who, like McGuire, turn their attention to the rhetorical dimensions of popular music. Mohrmann and Scott focus their attention on the songs popular during World War II; Rogers examines the themes of "redneck" and "cheating" in country music. McGuire explores the lyrics and musical context of Bruce Springsteen's songs to illustrate the themes of responsibility, optimism, and despair permeating the music. Of the critics mentioned, McGuire and Irvine and Kirkpatrick[12] offer the most rigorous attempts to examine the interactions of the musical components and lyrics in songs.

Rhetorical Studies: Television

Also within the past decade or so, rhetorical critics have focued considerable attention on television.[13] Recent works such as those by Occhipinti[14] and Doyle[15] have continued to explore the relationships between television, public issues, and rhetorical criticism. For illustration, Occhipinti explores the persuasive force of a particular episode of the Phil Donahue show concerning the Tylenol deaths in Chicago. She examines the rhetorical concept of ethos in a context of a para-social relationships established between the viewer and the "players" by the medium of television. Doyle focuses on the unfolding scenario of the PATCO strike and the formation of public attitudes toward PATCO in particular and labor unions in general that result from the portrayal of the players in the drama as presented on the evening news programs over time. Other critical examinations of television, such as Chesebro's examination of human values and popular television,[16] Grombeck's exploration of artistic and social codes in "All in the Family",[17] and Schrag, et al's discussion of the human collectivity resulting from television,[18] examine the potentially persuasive properties of the medium (such as sequencing of information, camera angles, and lighting) in conjunction with the verbal message to illumine the interactions among them as well as the meanings or values attached to the message by the viewers. The extent to which television shapes or reinforces the viewers' perception of social reality and subsequent value systems prevails as a concern with the rhetorical critic.

Rhetorical Studies: Film

Film has also become an object of the rhetorical critic's curiosity. Taken collectively, the following investigations provide a representation of the recent attempts to understand the unique persuasive properties of

film as it operates beyond the entertainment level in public communication to shape or transform our perception of reality. Gronbeck's 1976 paper on "Celluloid Rhetoric. . .",[19] for instance, focuses on documentary film. He constructs a "rhetorical-generic model" and applies it to documentaries such as High School and Protest. . . in a blending of more traditional content analysis (sequencing of shots, camera angles, etc.) with generic criticism. His study seems to provide a foundation for Benson's later study of High School[20] and Medhurst's analysis of Hiroshima, Mon Amour.[21] Benson's study examines the themes of power and sexuality in the film by dealing closely with the sequences of camera shots and accompanying dialog within a given scene. Medhurst examines the narrative structure of the film and the construction of meaning by combining the exploration of film shots, sound effects, and dialog as they form an "intellectual montage" and physical "senses" that leave the viewer with a reframed sense of reality. Rushing and Frentz's [22] analysis of The Deer Hunter develops a psychological/ritual model and applies it to the symbolism within the film surrounding war themes and rituals such as weddings. Blending their analysis of visual images and dialog within the film, Rushing and Frentz touch upon and offer insight into the significance of ritual and its importance to the human psyche.

To the extent that the illustrations referred to above reflect the rhetorical critic's curiosity about film, future analyses of films such as The Killing Fields will undoubtedly further extend the boundaries of our understanding of the persuasiveness of film.

Rhetorical Studies: Radio

In their recent text, Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, Medhurst and Benson assert that:

> Radio was for the second quarter of the twentieth century

> what television has been for the third: the primary means of entertainment, enlightenment, and instruction for the mass audience. As such, its role as inculcator of values, inspirer of ideas, and influencer of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions was substantial.[23]

Although rhetorical critics have examined speeches delivered over the radio, I don't believe that we have yet fully turned our attention to this medium to the extent that we have to television and film. Studies such as MacDonald's "Government Propaganda in Commercial Radio,"[24] and Morson's "The War of the Well(e)s,"[25] (both of which are included in Medhurst and Benson's text) provide some degree of insight for the rhetorical critic's approach to the examination of radio. MacDonald aptly illustrates the persuasive themes of the radio program, "Star Parade" in the early 1940's that attempted to unite the American public during World War II: patriotism, unity, and "the enemy," and he wends the usage of popular personalities of the day and skits about the "average Joe" together nicely by examining pieces of dialog and excerpts from the show. Though he touches upon the persuasiveness of the message itself, he does not consider radio as a medium participating in the construction of a rhetorical vision, nor its potential force in the construction of a social reality among the peoples of the times.

Morson's careful analysis of Orson Welles' radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds concludes that "we must be responsible, not just responsive, listeners".[26] Though the essay is useful, the rhetorical critic might further illumine the forms of such radio programs by considering them as contributors to social narratives and rhetorical visions. Further studies of the unique properties of the function and scope of radio within the media matrix need to be pursued if we are to understand more fully our cultural ideologies and values.

Rhetorical Studies: A Synthesis

To this point I have been briefly characterizing rhetorical studies of particular media. Though the discussion is admittedly incomplete, it does appear that such studies of the media during the past decade have tended to focus upon specific types of media. Most recently, however, rhetorical studies such as Chesebro's "The Media Reality"[27] suggest that rhetorical critics are moving toward an examination of the collective influence of the media in shaping our cultural realities.

Certainly our close attention to the persuasive function of particular media within our floating opera must and shall continue. As we move beyond our concern with the snytax or structure of media forms though, the more heuristically interesting questions will most likely emerge from those macroscopic perspectives shared by rhetorical critics and media critics alike. Such as assertion suggests the importance of these two groups talking to one another and passing ideas up and down along the river bank as our floating opera of reality replete with all the issues, persona, and insights passes our way. We are most likely to catch a clearer and more penetrating glimpse of "the show" in our research efforts if we do so collectively rather than separately.

Part II: A Pedagogical Approach

During the first portion of this paper I have briefly characterized approaches to rhetorical studies of the media. The question at this point becomes: How may we enhance the undergraduate student's ability to undertake such studies? Though I obviously cannot characterize the responses that we all might make, allow me to spend the remaining moments here discussing how we are approaching the question in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida.

In a sixteen-week junior level course called Popular Forms of Public Communication that typically enrolls 30 to 35 students, we first introduce the students to selected approaches to rhetorical criticism. In addition to essays on selected topics on a reserve reading list, we are currently using Medhurst and Benson's Rhetorical Dimensions in Media as our core text.

The course is divided into five units. During the first unit (three weeks), we introduce the students to rhetorical criticism and focus their attention on selected speeches and pieces of discourse. The second unit of the course (four weeks) deals with television and radio as forms of public communication. During this portion of the course, we include as case studies for discussion such programs as the evening news, popular television programs such as "Miami Vice" and "Hill Street Blues", and documentaries such as "Harlan County". Radio programs used as case studies include FDR's fireside chats and the "Prairie Home Companion". During this segment of the course, faculty members, from the Communication Department and other departments who have researched a related topic, often serve as guest lecturers.

The third unit (two weeks) focuses on film as communication. We include films such as The Water's So Clear a Blind Man Can See, Cities in

Crisis, and The Twisted Cross as objects of study.

The fourth unit in the course (two weeks) focuses on music as a form of communication. Focusing initially on working class songs and songs related to social change, the unit also includes songs and religion, and songs in the commercial market. This unit is supplemented with selected readings and illustrations of types of music being examined.

The fifth unit (four weeks) examines the graphic media such as cartoons, posters, magazines, photography, and postcards as popular media. Guest lecturers from our American Studies program typically participate in this segment of the course. Series of posters used by the AFL/CIO, the American Heart Association, and the American Cancer Society serve as objects of study during this unit.

During the course, students are required to write three different rhetorical analyses focusing on three different media. Usually students also undertake a group project that focuses upon a contemporary topic employing a variety of media. Typically the projects deal with political campaigns, advertising campaigns, and public information campaigns by organizations such as the American Heart Association and/or public utilities and civic action groups.

The course constitutes a challenge to the students because it requires them to develop a critical perspective for rhetorical criticism in general and media in particular. Because they often enter the course with little or no experience in writing rhetorical analyses of discourse, they first need to develop a sense of the function of and approach to rhetorical criticism. Once that has been established, they turn a critical eye or ear to media that they have seldom systematically investigated. The experience is occasionally initially disturbing but ultimately exciting and rewarding

for them. To consider gospel songs sung since their youth, for example, as rhetorical dimensions of their culture is occasionally a "great awakening" for the student. As a result of their inquiries, they develop a greater "rhetorical awareness" of their hurly-burly world of media and the curious interaction between the media and their sense of "reality".

At the present time, Popular Forms of Public Communication is the only course of its kind in our department or in the Mass Communication Department at our university. Though we anticipate allied courses in the program in the near future, it currently plays a significant role in sensitizing students to the rhetorical impact of the media in shaping, transforming, and reflecting our patterns of interaction with one another, and the values that lie at the core of our self- and cultural identities.

Notes

[1] Sam Becker, "Understanding Contemporary Public Communication," in The Jensen Lectures: Contemporary Communication Studies, ed. John I. Sisco (University of South Florida, Department of Communication, Tampa, FL, 1982), pp. 50-71.

[2] Becker, p. 67.

[3] James W. Chesebro, "Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series - A Seven Year Assessment," in Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World, 2nd ed., eds. Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 468.

[4] Michael McGuire, "'Darkness on the Edge of Town': Bruce Springsteen's Rhetoric of Optimism and Despair," in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook, eds. Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1984), p. 233.

[5] David A. Carter, "The Industrial Workers of the World and The Rhetoric of Song," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 66 (December, 1980), 365-374.

[6] David A. Carter, "Union Songs and Songs of the Great Depression" presented to the Med II Forum, College of Medicine, University of South Florida, March 1985.

[7] Stephen Kosokoff and Carl W. Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 35 (Summer, 1970), 295-302.

[8] Alberto Gonzalez and John Makay, "Rhetorical Ascription and the Gospel According to Dylan," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 69 (1983), 1-14.

[9] Cheryl Irwin Thomas, "Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma: The Persuasiveness of Song," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 27 (1974), 260-268.

[10] G. P. Mohrmann and F. Eugene Scott, "Popular Music and World War II: The Rhetoric of Continuation," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 145-156.

[11] Jimmy Rogers, "Redneck Rexus" presented at Southern Speech Communication convention, Hot Springs, ARK, Spring, 1982.

[12] James R. Irvine and Walter Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (1971), 272-289.

[13] See Bruce Gronbeck, "Audience Engagement in the 'Family'"; Richard Barton and Richard B. Gregg, "Middle East Conflict as a TV News Scenario: A Formal Analysis"; and Robert L. Schrag, et al, "Television's New Humane Collectivity" in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook," eds. Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1984) for a more complete discussion of approaches to rhetorical criticism and television.

[14] Sharon L. Occhipinti, "The Tylenol Phoenix: An Analysis of an Inter-Media Campaign Tactic," presented at Southern Speech Communication convention, Baton Rouge, LA, April, 1984.

[15] Marsha V. Doyle, "Mass Media Constraints & The Emergence of the PATCO Television Drama," presented at Speech Communication Association convention, Washington, D.C. November, 1983.

[16] Chesebro, "Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series - A Seven Year Assessment,"

[17] Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Audience Engagement in 'Family'" in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook, pp. 4-32.

[18] Robert L. Schrag, Richard A. Hudson, and Lawrence M. Bernabo, "Television's New Humane Collectivity," in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, pp. 47-58.

[19] Bruce Gronbeck, "Celluloid Rhetoric: On Genres of Documentary," in Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action, eds. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church, VA: The Speech Communication Association, 1978), pp. 139-164. Paper originally presented at the "'Significant Form' in Rhetorical Criticism" conference at the University of Kansas, 1976.

[20] Thomas Benson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Fredrick Wiseman's High School" in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, pp. 80-111.

[21] Martin J. Medhurst, "Hiroshima, Mon Amour: From Iconography to Rhetoric," in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, pp. 112-143.

[22] Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas A. Frentz, "The Deer Hunter: A Rhetoric of the Warrior," in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, pp. 62-79. Also in Quarterly Journal of Speech, 66 (1980), 392-406.

[23] Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson, eds., Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1984), p. 145.

[24] Fred MacDonald, "Government Propaganda in Commercial Radio--The Case of Treasury Star Parade, 1942-1943," in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, pp. 148-167.

[25] Gary Saul Morson, "The War of the Well(e)s," in Rhetorical Dimensions in Media, pp. 168-178.

[26] Morson, p. 177.

[27] James W. Chesebro, "The Media Reality: Epistemological Functions of Media in Cultural Systems," Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 1 (June 1984), 111-130.